

# The People of Baltistan

A transitional culture of Central Asia

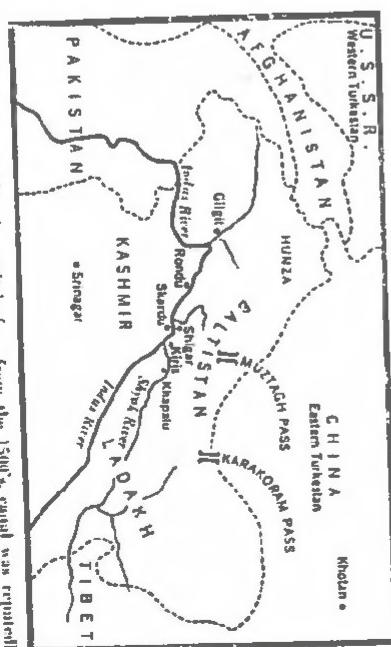
By JAMES HURLEY

HINDU ASIA WAS INTRODUCED to much of the world only seventy years ago in a book by E. E. Knight called *Where Three Empires Meet*. Although one of these "Three Empires"—that of the British—has now passed away, recent moves in High Asia by the Chinese have revived interest in the area. Yet knowledge of this remote region has remained remarkably unchanged since the latter nineteenth century.

Knight's work, which became almost a textbook for more than a generation of British school children, was mainly concerned with Hunza, a tiny mountain principality that was situated at the meeting place of British India, Russia, and China. But Knight also touched briefly on Baltistan, or Little Tibet, a fascinating and still relatively unknown region lying off the main routes and passes, then, as now, out of the main political arena of the contending powers.

Who are the Balti and why is their country sometimes called Little Tibet?

Briefly, the Balti are of mixed Mongloid and Caucasoid racial stock; they speak a language of the Tibetan-Burman family, and they are followers of the prophet Mohammed. This unusual combination of race, language, and religion probably exists nowhere else in the entire Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. In fact, Baltistan is one of the important transition areas between East and West; it marks the farthest westward extension of the Tibetan language and culture, and quite possibly the furthest eastward penetration by the Caucasoid peoples into one of the most formidable mountain bulwarks on the world's surface. One can well imagine how painfully slow must have been their progress if one looks at a relief map that shows the successive complex of mountain ranges, which thrust innumerable ice-scraped crags, high gorges, and deep gorges in the way of an intruder into the region.



Baltistan is three miles long. Dated 1900.

from the 1500' canal was reputedly built by Skardu's last Buddhist queen.

Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, and Kara-shar. Between A.D. 696 and 741, the Hsi-ti, fearing attack from the Tibetans, sent several missions to the Chinese court. One of the results was the conclusion of a marriage alliance—always important in the East—between a Baltic prince and a Tang princess. The Tang rulers also sent 4,000 Chinese soldiers in A.D. 722 to assist the Hali in repelling the Tibetan invaders. But all was for naught, and the Tibetans overran Baltistan in 737. Ten years later, in 747, the area changed hands again when a Chinese force re-established Tang influence.

**HEAVY LOADS.** Horses climb up steep southern slope of the 16,660-foot Skoro Jang, one of the many passes separating the inhabited valleys from one another.

**SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE.** Not only for remote places such as Baltistan, but also for many areas in India as well, journeys from northwestern India to Baltistan in about A.D. 632. Ilama Yung-kye-wedde<sup>1</sup>, after climbing precipices and crossing valleys, went up the course of the Siu-ho [Indus] River, and thence, by the help of flying bridges and footways made of wood across the chasms and precipices . . . we arrive at the country of Patala [Baltistan or Balistan]. It stands in the midst of the great Snowy Mountains. It produces wheat and pulse, gold and silver. Thanks to the quantity of gold, the country is rich in supplies . . . the people are rough and rude in character; and as for politeness, such

a thing has not been heard of. They are coarse and despicable in appearance . . . their letters are nearly like those of India, their language somewhat different. There are about a hundred sanghas [monasteries] in the country with something like a thousand priests, who show no great zeal for learning and are careless in their moral conduct."

Not a very complimentary passage,

but it does provide us with facts on which we can almost surely rely. At least historical circumstances have changed greatly over the last 1,300 years, much of what Ilama Tsang-yung's annals of the Tang Dynasty said is still appropriate. For example, the difficulties of the route along the deep Indus gorge between Gilgit and

the end of the ninth century, Tibet's power—and with it that mountain nation's one serious bid to be a world power—had passed. But even during this brief period, we may assume that much of the racial admixture we see now in Baltistan had taken place.

The blank of the next few centuries is not even penetrated by Marco Polo.

That notable medieval traveler and observer, when he passed several hundred miles to the north in the third century on his way to the court of Kublai Khan, made only the briefest reference to the innumerable areas of Baltistan lying to the south. He gave no geographic details of this region, but earlier students of his travels thought Baltistan might fall within it.

The modern view, however, is that

Polo meant only the country lying between the great bend of the Indus (at Gilgit) and the Panj.

Not until the end of the fifteenth

century do we begin to get some sort

of sketchy idea of the Hali in their present historical setting. It was then that the new Moslem rulers of Kashgar began to take an interest in their mountain neighbor to the northeast. The Hui-kung king had ruled Kashgar up to the middle of the fourteenth century, but he may have exercised loose control over the Hali from time to time. The Chinese march into Gilgit is equally remarkable as a feat of logistics. It marks the only time a major military force has crossed this continental divide between China and India, and it has been held to compare with, or even surpass, the great Alpine feats of such commanders as Hannibal and Napoleon.

However, the Chinese victory was only temporary: within a few years they were thrown out of Turkistan, and—as it has been doing again in modern times. In the latter part of the seventh century, the unified kingdom of Tibet arose, and what had been until that time only a disorganized collection of quarreling tribes suddenly became a major power with a considerable period. Whatever script was used—and we know almost nothing of what it was—it has long since been discarded (probably about the time of the Moslem conversion), but it does provide us with facts on which we can almost surely rely. At length considered a relic of idolatry, Baltistan enters the picture again. We know nothing of how long the Tibetans stayed, what the nature of their rule was, or what cultural interpenetration took place. It has been suggested that the Tibetan occupation was relatively short and that the sovereignty exercised was nominal. This whole experience of possession was the key to Tibet's success for the Tibetans became Buddhists, but it appears to have happened sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries.

Muslim history, the Hali had been

Buddhists. We know this mostly from carvings and graffiti on rocks showing such typically Buddhist subjects as funerary monuments and Buddhist temples—which are still visible at several places in Baltistan (the large one near Skardu, shown on pages 222-23, is considered the finest example). We have no direct evidence as to when the Hali became Buddhists, but it appears to

have happened sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries.

Hsian Tsang's reference to the priests and monasteries already quoted, is the only positive clue. But these rock figures carved on the rocks, now little

more than 2,000 miles separating Baltistan from Tibet, indicate the existence of an earlier, pagan religion. Among the crude figures carved on the rocks, now little

**THE HIMALAYA.** Horses climb up steep southern slope of the 16,660-foot Skoro Jang, one of the many passes separating the inhabited valleys from one another.

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control over the Hali from time to time.

But, on the whole, Baltistan had prob-

ably retained its independence. Now

the Moslem sultans looked at it pos-

sibly with an eye to picking up with

eastern Turkistan, where the popula-

tion had embraced Islam some time

during or soon after the wave, in the

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# People of Baltistan

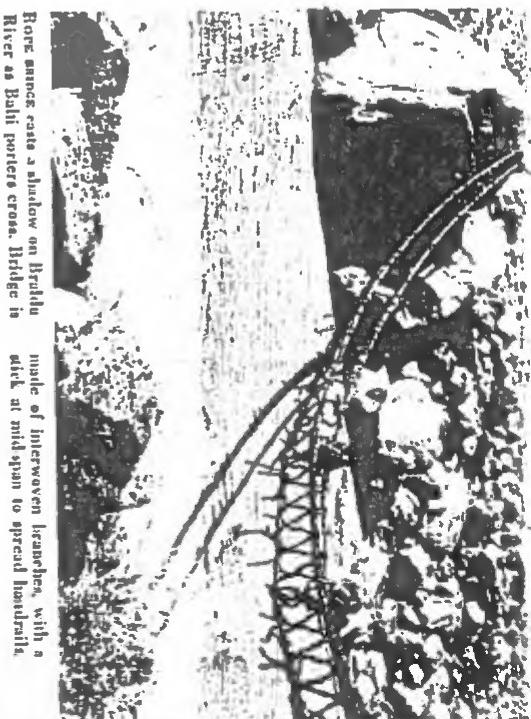
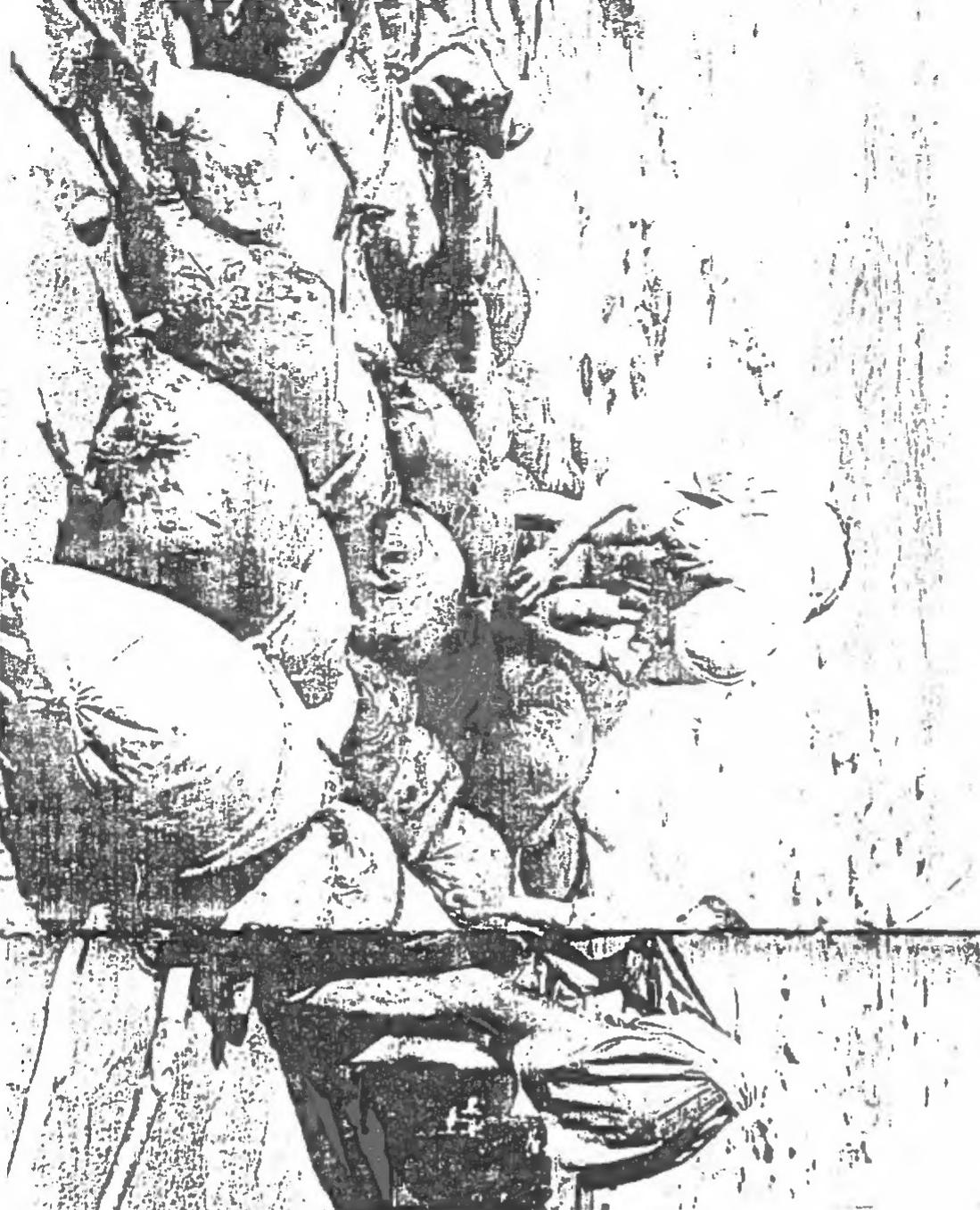
Agriculture, herding, and dairy farming form the basis of the Balti economy

By  
JAMES HURLEY

Men seen at a skin raft are distinguished

River in Baltistan. Normally used in

calm water, the rafts can ride rapids.



Bone gauge casts a shadow on broad River as Balti porters cross bridge

made of interwoven branches, with a stick at mid span to spread boulders.

**D**URING THE TWO CENTURIES that the British stayed in India, they penetrated into nearly every corner of the country and found out almost all there was to know about it. This was not only because of British military, administrative, and security needs, but also because of a national penchant for all venture—combined, in many cases, with a taste for scholarly enquiry or interest in the culture. Thus, was produced a wealth of factual and descriptive books that will long remain a monument to British rule in India. The "District Gazetters," in particular, are exemplary for they relate in minute detail all that was known at the time about the people of a given district—*their history, ethnology, language, folklore, and economy*.

But for Baltistan there were no "District Gazetteers," since the country was both distant and under another administration, that of the Mahratta of Kashmir. The British did not extend their rule into north India until the middle of the nineteenth century, and for various reasons, including administrative expedience, they left Kashmir and its several surrounding districts in the hands of a Hindu soldier-prince. Although British officials were stationed in Kashmir during the next hundred years, there were few of them, and they generally served as "advisers." Their numbers grew, however, during times of military or political tension.

Because Kashmir occupied a strategic position at India's juncture with China, Russia, and Tibet, and because

the maintenance of cordial relations with the ruling prince was important to the regime at Delhi, it was necessary to obtain permits to visit the area. This was only a formality in the case of Srinagar and the Kashmir Valley, but it took on real meaning as applied to such frontier areas as Baltistan and Ladakh. However, when it became known that the hunting was excellent and that prize deer heads were to be had in the faraway Karakorum, red tape disappeared in the face of attacks from that formidable breed known as "the British 'sportsman.'" And so the region was "discovered."

In the latter nineteenth century, Sir Francis Younghusband's daring trip from Peking across the Gobi Desert and into India over the Kunzugh Pass excited world interest in the Karakoram. Soon after that, the great scientific and mountaineering expeditions began to arrive. The first, in 1892, was mainly British, led by Sir William Conway. The expedition penetrated to the Naforo Glacier, one of the longest glaciers in the world outside of polar regions. The members mapped much of the tributary glacier system and climbed several peaks. Between 1899 and 1912, Mrs. Fanny Balkow Workman, an American, and her husband, Dr. William Hunter Workman, conducted five expeditions to Baltistan and the Karakorum, during major scientific and mountaineering expeditions in the early years of this century were those of the Duke



Horsey's narrow boat ferry passengers across Shyok River at Khaplu. Conte

other Sultan, Dr. Filippo de Filippis, in 1913-14. The territory covered by both expeditions overlapped the Karakorams (i.e., Baltistan) and Chinese Turkestan. In 1922-24, the Americans Katherine and Hubert Ledyard Harrington spent a year trekking and climbing in Baltistan and Ladakh. Since then, and particularly in the last ten years, the Karakorams have become

an international mountaineering playground. Each year from two to four expeditions contend for the honor of reaching the tops of perhaps a score of unclimbed peaks over 20,000 feet. Americans have had a good share in the conquests of some of them, including Broad Peak and Nishatdorun, and have acquitted themselves well on the 21,259-foot K-2, the second highest

grass baskets on villagers' backs are made in accord with the size of user.



Mountain in the world, after Everest. What is Baltistan like and how does one reach it? These questions are asked even in Pakistan, for few Pakistanis have had the opportunity or perhaps desire to go there. The usual tendency is to confuse Baltistan with Baluchistan, one of Pakistan's provinces to the southwest. Yet the area is within ninety minutes flying time from Rawalpindi, Pakistan's capital

Twenty-day mule track over the high and forbidding Deosai Plateau is excellent enough to thrill the most sophisticated traveler. The plane skins just above successively rising ranges and peaks, and skids the northwest side of sprawling, snow, and ice-capped Nanga Parbat, called the "German Killer" for the twenty-six Germans and porters killed on it in the 1930's. Shortly before arriving at Skardu—the plane sweeps into the Indus Gorge. Those walls often seem to hem it in on three sides. Skimming close above one last, high barrier, the plane lands on Skardu's lake bed mud field.

In numerous small tea shops one hears some of the dialects and tongues that illustrate the different streams of humanity now converging Skardu population: Burushaki from Hunza, Shina from Gilgit, Khowar from Chitral, and sometimes Sindhi or Pashto.

Speaking Punjabi from Lahore, an occasional Kashmiri for the occasional Kasmiri who for the reposes to be made from a Balti in from the mountain highland a backload of wheat, butter, or a load of tea, and perhaps—if his wife has been persuading—a bit of bright for her. In the sein, oddly at Gujars speaking strange Pahari accents unpack horseback of chunk and kerosene cans brought in carts across the high Deosai route. The trip may take a heavy toll of their animals if they are caught in a snowstorm or one of the deadly cold winds which the plateau is noted. The

wind and nature of these winds can be imagined from the occasional blasts I sweep into the Skardu Valley, usually accompanied by lowering dark clouds, they shake houses and so violently and make such a noise that one begins to think the end of the world will be similar.

Tuts linguistic mélange has affected the local language, and pure Balti is hardly spoken in Skardu any more. The local native is such a mixture of Urdu, Balti, Hindoo, and Persian that (one of the official languages of Pakistan) is the lingua franca.

The populated part of Baltistan, which lies on the southern and western flanks of the Great Karakorum chain, is made up of many valleys. The first of these valleys is that of the great Indus River, running northwest from its source in Tibet, and the rest



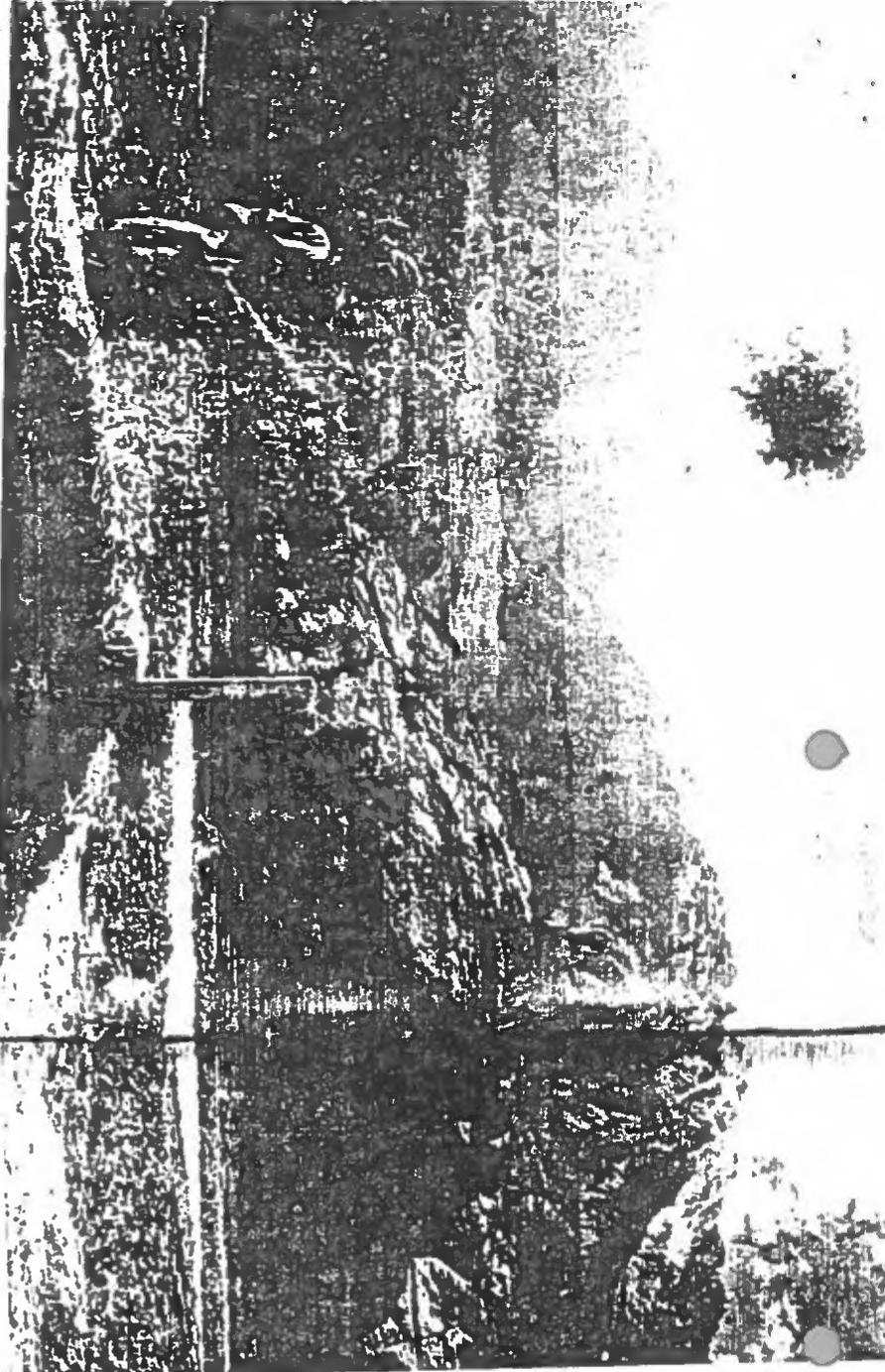
Snowing banks of upper Shyok on mountains. Air bladders may be inflated by boaters while the raft is in motion.

Horsey's narrow boat is pulled upstream by

As it nears bank, passengers jump in

and help pull to the opposite shore.

are those of tributary rivers, such as the Shyok and Shigar, and a number of lesser, placid streams—the Hunza, Thal, Braldu, and Hashin. From at least the time of the Moslem conversion, local rulers have presided over seven of these valleys or valley series: Skardu, Bonapuri, Shigar, Rondu, Kires, Khumann, and Totti. From time to time, other principalities have risen but have usually been short-lived. As far back as is known, these local rulers—called variously *Rajah*, *Shah*, *Sultan* and *raja*—have been fighting among themselves. Only in a few instances has a leader arisen influential enough to unite them all—Ali Mir of Khaplu (and these two are possibly the same person) are the main ones. Not generally the raja of Skardu has enjoyed a traditional position of pre-eminence, perhaps because Skardu has always been, as far as we know, Baltistan's trade center.



Tossing chaff in air, a Batti farmer separates chaff from the kernels of winnowed crop in Shigar Valley, Greece.

grain by blowing it away to the side.



Photo shows Batti grain separator, who uses a hand fan to blow away chaff.

Batti grain separator, who uses a hand fan to blow away chaff.

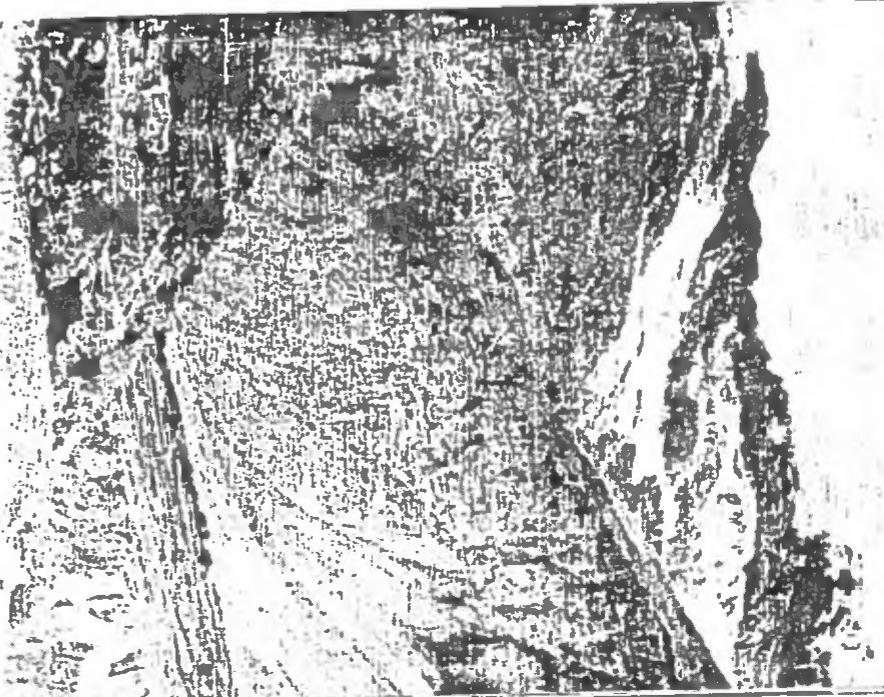
ing on the season. In summer, when pluvial melt, it is virtually impossible to cross the raging torrents that one finds more than gentle mountain streams at other times of the year. Various types of bridges have been constructed in the Batti to overcome this. One of them is the rope bridge made of woven branches, it is used mainly to span the larger rivers, including the Indus. Crossing one for the first time is an experience not soon forgotten. The trickiest part occurs in the middle of the bridge, where most climb over or under a stick holding apart the two handrails; the stick passes a distance above the height of the stick makes either move awkward.

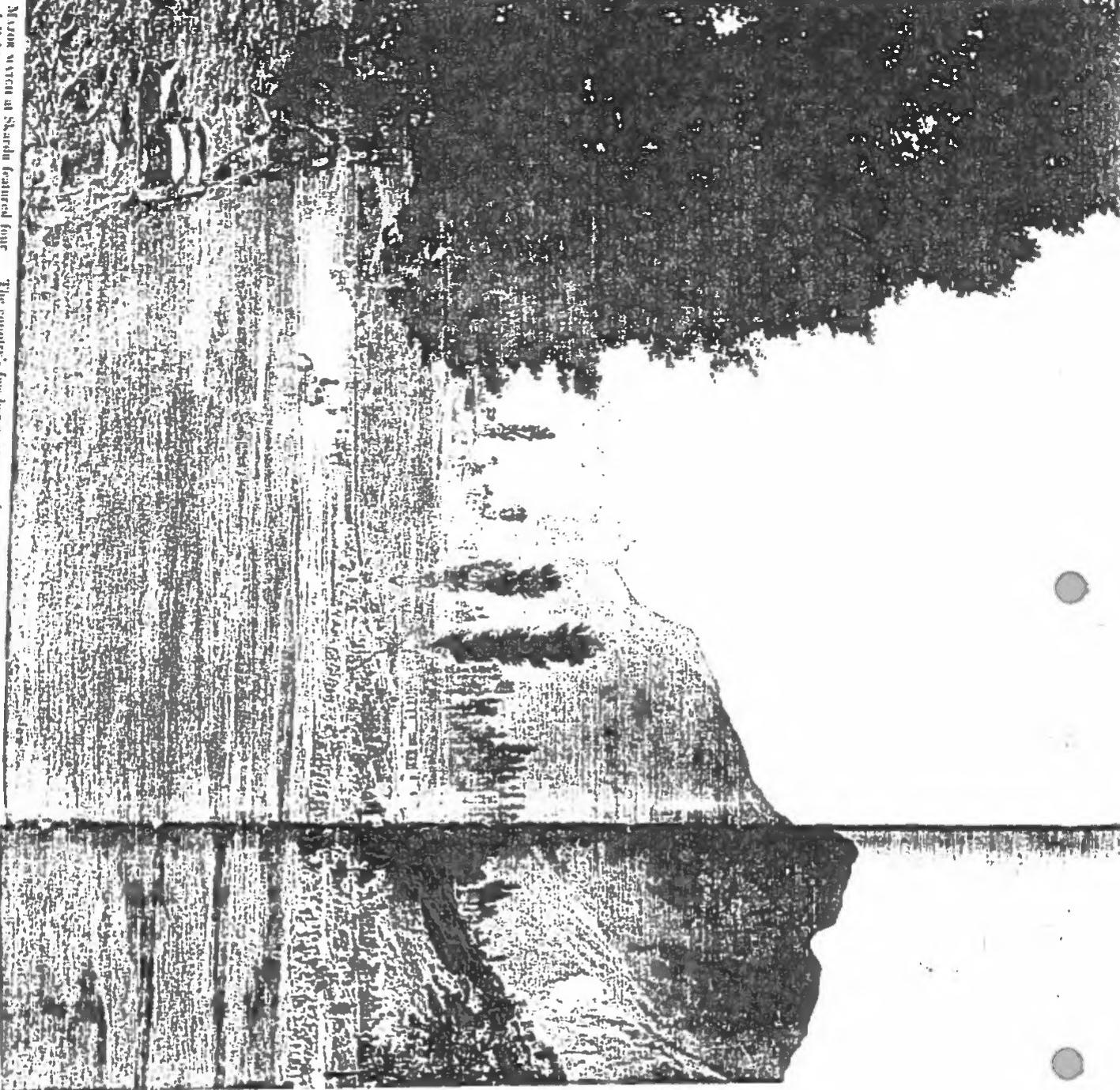
In the alleys that have sizable perennial streams, crude but sturdy wooden bridges on the archer principle have been built at important crossings. These consist of one arch, whose super-

porting timbers project over other timbers leading from the bank. The shore ends are weighted with masonry. Where the Valley widens and the streamlet divides into small channels, local villagers merely bridge them with crudely hewn planks or logs. To my mind, crossing these is a harrowing experience, for some are twenty to twenty-five feet long and have a most unpleasant tendency to lurch west in the middle. The combination of up and down motion with the illusion of sideward movement from looking at the rushing water is unsettling.

Probably the most enjoyable mode of travel in Battiistan is by zork (raft), a skin frame lashed with raw deer or more inflated goatskins. Zorks are used

Batti means that near Kharmanag, in Tum Valley, crop is may be harvested.





Major WRCU at Skardu featured four  
of Hallasan's seven regions as players.

The country's few houses are more log  
cabins, half-filled with water, boats  
soon, and she throws into it several  
handfuls of roasted barley flour, stir-  
ring until the mix thickens. Hesitantly  
she takes a chunk of dried white butter  
and works it carefully picking out the  
goat hairs. The family cannot afford  
much butter every day. Gulbi does  
not have to call the family—they are  
suddenly there as she puts the steaming

mass on a large metal plate on the  
floor. The family attacks the fat rich  
food vigorously. Tomorrow the main  
meal will consist of *zun* accompanied  
by a sauce of green herbs.

"A glance at the sun reminds Gulbi  
that *zun* must be ready soon. Calling  
over the roof to her neighbor, she asks  
for much (fire). A little girl reaches  
through the thatch and hands her a  
few embers in a broken piece of earth.  
Gulbi adds bits of  
roasted wood for tinder and soon her  
hearth is ready. The large copper  
cauldron, half-filled with water, boils  
soon, and she throws into it several  
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**O**n the mountainside across the  
valley, since first light, younger  
villagers have been busily cutting and  
approaching *bursa* (wild artemisia).  
This dry-looking plant, invisible at a  
distance, is both the food of the ibex  
and the only free fuel the villagers can  
stick quite against the coming winter.  
Occasionally against an apricot tree may he  
cut down or a small amount of cow  
dung dried but *bursa* is the main so-  
lution to the fuel problem.

"On the way home, one of the young  
*bartspong* (gatherers of *bursa*) reves  
an ibex and says he wishes he had a



Every spring, Halli spectators at a  
polo match let goats stray from pastures.